



Steampunk in Brazil: Visuality and Sociability in an Urban Retro-Futuristic Culture

ÉVERLY PEGORARO¹

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro
State University of Midwestern Paraná

Introduction

“What if it had been different?” Members of the urban culture known as *steampunk* pose this disquieting question through several practices. Their main proposition is to evoke a journey to the 19th-century past by reintroducing present or futuristic perceptions into an “alternative universe” where mechanical and steam technologies have developed in place of the vertiginous technological development that currently holds sway.

This mix of past elements and futuristic technology, which has influenced several contemporary urban cultures, is known as retro-futurism. This article discusses the visual experience of one such culture—steampunk—using Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge,² a youth group in Brazil, as a research focus. *Steamers*, as the participants call themselves, recreate the past of 19th century Victorian England, mainly in the context of the Steam Age, inserting current perceptions and futuristic technology into their creations.

To justify this interest, steamers point to the fact that steam revolutionized production methods and thereby laid the foundations for the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, a period of tremendous change that brought new means of transportation and productive techniques, as well as major discoveries in science, medicine, and weaponry. Having emerged in literature as a science-fiction subgenre, the idea burgeoned from the printed page to take to the streets in a retro-futuristic conception, mixing past, present, and future in an “alternative world.” The joining of *steam* and *punk* is due to the context: a hybrid time combining the Victorian Era with a future dominated by a *punk* outlook. *Punk*, for some authors of this style, evokes the idea of rebellion against the aesthetic of modern manufacturing, which is the critique of the aspect of massification/industrialization of products. The steamers think these kind of products are made just to feed a circuit of consumption. That’s why one of their proposals is “DIY” (do it

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² The original Brazilian name is *Loja Paraná do Conselho Steampunk*.

yourself) (Marsocci & Deblasio, 2011). Other representatives, like G. D. Falksen (2011), attribute the influence to cyberpunk literature rather than punk culture proper.

The steampunk aesthetic encompasses visions of Victorian clothing endowed with a punk appearance, current technologies remolded by ancient techniques, gears, and weapons. The reference sources, mostly visuals, are cinema, comic books, role-playing games, and, of course, historical and literary narratives. The steamers re-signify the visuality of a reinvented past in the present through visual, behavioral, and media performances with a futuristic character.

They reinvent established historical narratives by mixing in characters, facts and fiction. The idea is to re-elaborate situations that existed in the past by asking what would have happened if certain technical interventions had taken different directions, or by inserting present-day technology into the past environment (Falksen, 2011, p. 30). In other cases, steampunk creates contextualized characters in the 19th century, combining inventions from the Age of Steam with futuristic technologies. However, it is important to note that although steampunk typically search for inspiration in the 19th century, it is not restricted to it; other historical periods can also be visited. The important thing is the insertion of the "steam" scenario in the creations.

Currently, Brazilian steampunk brings together followers from many of the country's states, who are grouped in what they call "lodges." The group analyzed here—Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge—is located in Curitiba, the capital of the state of Paraná in Southern Brazil. This article will analyze how this group elaborates a specific visuality and, thus, how steampunk proposes a peculiar critical worldview. The analysis will also discuss some relevant considerations about media culture's influence on this process.

Based on the assumptions of visual culture studies, the spiral time conception developed by Michel Maffesoli (1987), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of the act of seeing as an act of perceiving the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1984), the analysis will establish relations between visuality and sociability, alternating reflections on a media product from Brazilian steampunk culture—the magazine *Vapor Marginal*—with discussion of specific experiences of steamers from the Curitiba group Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge. The analysis aims to show the relation between the discourse that steampunk culture promotes and that discourse's reappropriation as performances and products, in which the image "put in shape" becomes an important link. The article also offers an explanation of Maffesoli (1987).

The research proposition therefore moves from the image production analysis itself to the ways in which image is appropriated by youth culture in a society strongly marked by the imaging appeal. It addresses reflections on how visuals impact observers' perception of the world, interfering in their experiences and sociabilities.

The research methodology combines participant observation with a case study.³ I have followed the activities of Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge for about two years. The Curitiba group, one of the most active in Brazil, promotes and attends events such as workshops for customization, picnics, and cultural meetings.

These events allow the reappropriations of *steampunk* propositions to be more clearly realized through performances by each steamer, as will be pointed out throughout this article. According to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001), studying processes and products from visual culture furthers the understanding of visuality as a crucial factor in social practices, whether individual or collective.

The constitutive processes of visualities involve acts of seduction, rejection, and co-optation through images. Such actions arise from visual experience, which suggests and establishes *links* to the symbolic repertoire of each person. It is a mapping—that is, a traceable process—of visual experiences permeated by references or cultural practices, which help in comprehending the social world.

The theoretical outline of the research is grounded in visual culture studies, whose main goal is to understand visual production as social, cultural, and political practices in a direct unfolding of cultural studies. Since the conception of cultural practices as meaning practices, research has gone on to discuss the complexities of visual production processes by focusing on intersections among visual culture, subject, and society. W. J. T. Mitchell (2003), a prominent researcher in this area, emphasizes that visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not only the social construction of the visual.

For José Luis Brea (2005), there are no objects, phenomena, or means of pure visuality. The acts of seeing are extremely complex, which result from crystallization and interlacing of two types of forces: the operators (textual, mental, imaginary, sensory, mnemonic, technical, bureaucratic, institutional) and the interest of representation (of race, genre, class, cultural difference, belief and affinity groups, etc.).

Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) defines visuality as the intersection of power and visual representation, constituted by a set of relations combining information, imagination, and perception in a rendition of physical and psychic space. I propose that visuality comes about through three main types of operation. The first—classification via denomination, categorization, and definition—refers to the nomination process of the visible, conceptualized by Michel Foucault. Second, visuality divides classified groups as a way of social organization. Lastly, the classification seems to accord with certain aesthetics. This set of operations to classify, separate, and aestheticize is what I term the visuality complex. The denomination *complex* indicates the production of a range of organizations and social processes (Mirzoeff, 2011, pp. 3–5).

³ Participant observation consisted of participation in the activities promoted by Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge. I also administered semi-structured questionnaires to active members and monitored the discussions in the group's Facebook profile and its blog.

This analysis presupposes that steampunk proposes a specific visuality constituted by a set of elements (textual, discursive, and visual) that, in turn, induces strategies of visibility and sociability in small groups formed in different places through the direct interference of media culture in this process.

Perceiving the World from the Steampunk Perspective

For Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1984), comprehension of the act of seeing begins with the relationship between body and vision. To him, seeing is an act of perceiving the world, but in a reciprocal relation, since perception reflects the world's impact on individuals and simultaneously influences their experiences, which are lived through corporeality. This dynamic confluence does not permit vision to be reduced to a static look; rather, it transpires through movement.

Steampunk culture is said to offer a way of looking at a world permeated by discourses and representations of the past that are shot through with futuristic concepts, usually related to science and technology. This way to look at the world—to feel it, as Merleau-Ponty put it—induces a cultural dynamic concretized in strategies of sociability and products of a micro-media circuit (Thornton, 1995), meaning that they circulate outside the mainstream and for a very specific audience.

In this article, steamers visualize the past of the 19th century as a romantic time of great adventures and exploration. Simultaneously, and contradictorily, they mention fascination and pessimism in relation to technology. The steampunk products and aesthetic-visual performances derive from a technological imaginary characterized by the consequences of its development. In the steampunk dynamics, the visual becomes a sort of sociability bond, building, as Maffesoli (1995) suggests, a new ethos understood as an “ethics of aesthetics.”

I argue that all areas of social life are inflected by the “game of shapes,” because everything that is created (whatever its nature) is only accepted if it is “put in shape,” or in other words, shown in images. The shapes play a primordial role in daily rituals.

The imaginary world that is being elaborated contemporaneously is based on an archetype substrate. It repeats, cyclically, what is believed outdated. This is what allows talk of wonder and enchantment. The imaginary, the symbolic, the oneiric and the festive are some of the parameters that better express this process. They are where the archaisms are reinvented and reused by several means of technological development. (Maffesoli, 1995, p. 147, my translation)

“Putting in shape” characterizes a spiral sense of time that refers to archaic themes, myths, or images from “good old times,” reintroduced in contemporary experiences. Such features fit perfectly in steampunk strategies that, through their visual experience, promote a negotiation among past, present, and future. This cultural dynamic allows realization of the bonds established between the consumption of material and symbolic goods fed by media culture.

Several authors have discussed “media culture influence” (Kellner, 2001), the “mediatized society,” and consequent individual or collective social experiences. Denis Moraes (2006) emphasizes that the contemporary setting features interactions based on technological and informational devices: “Technological interactions have a remarkable influence on sociability patterns and individual perceptions” (p. 36, my translation). Muniz Sodré (2002) also asserts that contemporary society is ruled by mediatization, since the articulation between individual conduct guidelines and technological mediations is made possible by communication technologies. Here I aim to strengthen the argument that media help to arrange perceptions and cognitions.

In steampunk culture, the visuality extracted from literature, history, and media culture results in behaviors, languages, gestures and corporal attitudes, clothing, accessories, media products (photo novels, games, music, etc.), and literary narratives. This transformation is evident in the steampunk creation of a steamer⁴ from the Curitiba group who built a steampunk identity by extracting information from his favorite television series, *Doctor Who*. Thus, the creative mixture that informs the character refers to Victorian history, cinema, and science fiction, turning him into Captain Escarlata⁵, as described in the following excerpt:

Captain Escarlata is an immortal who has been working for an organization called Torchwood, created by Queen Victoria. He earned a pocket watch when Her Majesty was still a princess. He was one of her several lovers. He was abducted from his epoch by observers’ aliens, who dominated the temporal technology. They implanted a device in his arm that forces him to travel back in time; otherwise, he will perish. But the price of time travel is too high. Every time he uses this “special” device, he loses a little of his immortality. Moreover, there is a secret way of using it and only he, Tardis’ conductor Doctor Who, and Captain Jack, who controls Torchwood, know how to do it. (Capitão Escarlata—Biographia, n.d., my translation)

At events promoted by Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge, Captain Escarlata interacts with other steamers, sometimes creating combined narratives with other participants. At one such cultural event in July 2012, for instance, a tale assembling the steampunk histories and identities of several members of the Curitiba group was written by another active participant in the group, who is also a student and the author of two published books of fiction.

The tale was read during the event as a narrative performance by the involved steamers. The excerpt below describes an adventure Captain Escarlata and his crew have in an airship. One of the most common means of transportation in steampunk narratives, the airship reflects the direct influence of science fiction and the inventive promise of the 19th-century Steam Revolution.

⁴ To protect steamers’ identities, their real names are not used here. When possible, they are called by the names they go by in the steampunk universe.

⁵ Space limitations do not allow the insertion of images of Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge members here, but they are accessible at <http://pr.steampunk.com.br>.

Of all the entire crew, from the two brutes who fueled the engine with coal to the skinny one who read the instruments of the main panel, there was one person he [Captain Escarlata] had chosen to be his protected one. Or better, his protected woman. She was the only woman on the crew, and she was the best pilot he had ever seen in action on the five continents. Nevertheless, what had really made him hire her was the ambitious brightness in her eyes. He had proudly shown the same when he was younger. And he needed to be reminded of this time, when things were simpler and less outrageous.⁷ (Goch, 2012, my translation)

Thus, the combination of elements reworked from cinema, television series, and historic narratives resulted in the creation of a steampunk character that in turn enabled literary and aesthetic performances in an event of sociability among steamers.

The steamers' different view of the world is noteworthy in that it searches the past for elements of their attitudes and behavior in the present time. The references are re-signified and turned into products, sociabilities, and performances. This mixture of seeing and perceiving the world through experiences in corporeity is what Merleau-Ponty was pointing to.

Among Performances, Products, and Sociabilities in a Located Circuit

One concern of visual culture studies is precisely to understand the several positions of the individual who emerges through visual relations and products derived from visual culture. One can realize several levels of appropriation of the general propositions of steampunk culture, which was born in literature and pervaded the media culture expressed in such elements such as movies, comic books, and role-playing games to become an urban culture located in different parts of the world.

This part of the article will present one of these steampunk products, exemplifying the relation that can be established between steampunk's propositions and its respective reappropriations in integrated products of a circuit outside the mainstream. It is about the magazine *Vapor Marginal*, the first Brazilian product devoted specifically to steampunk, which had only one digital edition, in 2011, edited by Bruno Accioly, one of the founders of the Steampunk Council of Brazil.⁶ An editorial in the magazine discusses the directions the product was intended to take. Of note is a certain nostalgia for values regarded as noble in the past but lost in the present. The magazine describes itself as an

organic and chaotic manifestation of the imaginary of those who express themselves here, in an open and intrinsically anarchistic magazine, which is nevertheless surrounded

⁷ From the tale *The Captain* by Cinthia Goch, presented at the event *Café a Vapor: A evolução steampunk —Tributo a Charles Darwin* [Steam Coffee: The Steampunk Evolution—A Tribute to Charles Darwin].

⁶ The Steampunk Council of Brazil is that country's first association of steamers. It has introduced the culture more intensively in Brazil, encouraging those who are interested in steampunk to establish lodges in different regions of the country.

by a potpourri of noble, ethical, and moral values that perhaps have existed more in fiction than in harsh reality. (*Vapor Marginal*, 2011, p. 2, my translation)

Steamers feature as “temporal singularities, ladies and gentlemen torn from the context past of the 19th century, whose Temporal Providence is regurgitated two centuries later, destitute of their own memories” (*Vapor Marginal*, 2011, p. 39, my translation). The text emphasizes how the 19th century is relevant to society, having transformed it so it could reach the place where it is today, but also points out that this relevance has gradually been forgotten. Steampunk privileges the period of gigantic steam engines, praising mechanical inventions as well as the scientific and technical achievements of the Industrial Revolution.

Vapor Marginal positions itself as a means of steampunk fan expression but also has a peculiar “pedagogic potential” at a time when Brazilian society sees itself surrounded by “educational, ethical, and moral problems” (*Vapor Marginal*, 2011, pp. 3 and 5, my translation). The next excerpt draws attention to the intent to combine cultural practices, criticism, and pleasure. This strategy can also be understood as a way for steamers to place themselves critically in the world and be part of it, contradicting the claim that political engagement is absent from contemporary urban cultures (Herschmann, 2009).

The ludic nature of the movement and the diversity of subjects in which the steamers show themselves and work in favor of not only production, but also enjoyment and cultural rescue, turn steampunk into a powerful tool for teaching and learning. (*Vapor Marginal*, 2011, p. 3, my translation)

As this issue of the magazine was meant to be the first in a periodical media product, it introduces the steampunk theme to beginners, besides showing its strength in Brazil. Several authors did interviews with the forerunners of this culture in Brazil. The content consists of reports and opinion pieces discussing retro fashion, the difference between cyberpunk and steampunk, relations and respective influences between technology and culture, and fascination with the 19th century, mainly in the literary universe.

Like one of the steamers introduced above, a substantial number of steampunk fans are also literary authors outside the mainstream. One purpose of *Vapor Marginal*, according to its editorial, is to open a public space in which anonymous or known writers can publish their work. The better part of this first issue is devoted to publication of short fiction.

However, empirical research in progress reveals that not all members share this taste for, and knowledge of, steampunk literature—and rightly so, for the imagistic repertoire that inspires steamers’ identity construction is important and diversified. Each person seeks inspiration in different sources, such as the media products already mentioned, books, and online materials illustrative of the period. Even musical bands that label themselves as steampunk, such as Abney Park, influence their supporters’ inventiveness.

Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge has one strategy that distinguishes it from other Brazilian lodges: steampunk workshops, held every two months or so in a cultural space in Curitiba known as Solar do Barão. In these workshops, influenced by do-it-yourself logic, older members teach beginners to create different accessories for their steampunk costumes. They also advise newer participants on something that is difficult for most steamers: creating a character with its own identity in the steampunk world.

The results of these customization workshops are displayed in the events the Curitiba group organizes. Just as other urban cultures practice cosplay,⁸ steamers promote steampunk. They attend cultural events dressed up as their steampunk identity, show off their clothing, relate the character's history, interact with other followers, and exhibit what they have produced in relation to steampunk: music, dance, literature, craftwork, objects, clothing customization.

Usually, the aesthetics of clothing and accessories stands out among steamers. However, it is important to stress that although steampunk culture provides a reading of a past time, it is not just playing mimetically with clothing and accessories. Everything is re-signified with contemporary features in a sort of bricolage, the conception proposed by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2009). Vintage clothing and objects are elaborated, usually by hand and by the steamers themselves, who also develop their criticism of the commodified model of cultural production in the mainstream.

For participants in fashion subcultures, the style remaking through appropriation of historical objects and images can be a political statement about class, ethnic, and cultural identity. Many young people assert their defiance of mainstream culture specifically by developing styles that do not conform to the "good taste" of mainstream culture. (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 79)

However, it is not necessary to be dressed up in a steampunk costume to be or to feel like a steamer. The events promoted by the group analyzed here are open to anyone, regardless of attire. Interaction with followers of other urban cultures is also common at these social events.

The men, women, and teens who formed the object group of this research show equal enthusiasm for 19th-century technology and inventions, the steam-world scenario, Victorian Era history, and the science fiction authors they know best, H. G. Wells and Jules Verne. Their costumes mix the top hats, pocket watches, and long gowns of the English past with details revealing a strong *punk* influence (gothic as well, in some cases). The women show off sensuality in their clothing, countering the oppression of the old corsets. Watch gears, compasses, goggles, and weapons are indispensable accessories to steampunk gentlemen and ladies.

⁸ *Cosplay* involves dressing up as a character from anime, literature, or other works of fiction. The practitioner creates a character and other accessories and imitates the poses, speech, and behavior of the chosen character. Usually the performances happen at specific events that bring together fans of this practice.

The Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge website⁹ holds many images from the group's photo essays, one of which became the "first Brazilian steampunk photo novel," as the Curitiba steamers proudly announce. The photo novel *Carnivale Steampunk* (Loja Paraná do Conselho Steampunk, 2010), broadcast on YouTube, mixes the literary narrative, photography, and sound production of Steampunk Council of the Paraná Lodge's members, who created, produced, and staged the photo novel in different settings in Curitiba. The participants also customized the clothing, accessories, makeup, and scenery themselves. The narrative involves the histories of the steamers' characters; in other words, it is a collective creation in which their individual identity creations intersect.

The plot relies on the classic staples of science-fiction stories: time travel, technology, and weapons in a context of gallantry. Notwithstanding the understandable limitations of an amateur production, this photo novel can be characterized as a visual product that has resulted from the sociability of an urban culture united by a common interest in retro-futurism. The production was a success, and at the request of steamers from other countries with whom Brazilians interact, it has been translated into English – *Carnivale Steampunk* (Loja Paraná do Conselho Steampunk, 2011).

It is thus evident that the discourse's interlacing of steampunk propositions and urban youth performance points to deeper sociotemporal concerns that amount to inquiries into rationalism and intensified consumption. *Vapor Marginal's* editor harshly criticizes the manufactured models of the products:

[In today's world] . . . inventors are treated like crazy people, replaced by sterile labs that spew into the market useless toys produced by corporations aiming to exercise control over this new religion, consumption, and indoctrinating us about what they want us to desire, convincing us of what we supposedly need, and leading us to believe that answers are more important than questions. (*Vapor Marginal*, 2011, p. 39, my translation)

Thereby, as Maffesoli (1995) contends, the image, in its ramifications, effectively becomes a bond of sociality among steamers because it can be understood as the result of the group's specific visuality, its way of seeing and perceiving the world, and its way of producing and visually performing such perceptions.

Concluding Remarks

The main question behind this research was how steamers turn steampunk discourse and criticism into visual appropriation, resulting in performances and products of an urban culture with distinct and fleeting sociabilities. Discourse and criticism in the steampunk culture of the capital of the Brazilian state of Paraná are transposed from literary propositions and urban culture to the streets of Curitiba. The magazine *Vapor Marginal* was used here to exemplify this process because it is a first, unique media product specifically devoted to Brazilian steampunk. The second part of this analysis examined how a

⁹ Available at <http://pr.steampunk.com.br>

specific group with its own peculiarities handled the appropriation and corresponding transformation into steampunk products and performances.

The goal of this study was to depart from the usual image-oriented analysis to study the relations and interactions between the individual and visual culture and thereby understand how a specific way to look at the world is established and subsequently embodied in products, performances, and sociabilities, as in Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization.

Michel Foucault (1999) showed that every social practice has a discursive disposition. This analysis has shown that contemporary youth cultures, whose cultural dynamics—initially regarded as expressions of mere hedonism, consumerism, enjoyment, and need for visibility—actually reveal different types of criticism and agency of spaces and cultural products. As Michel de Certeau (1998) maintained, there are different ways of cultural appropriation. Those of the steamers studied here definitely cannot be characterized as passive reception.

Antonio Muñoz Carrion (2007) has discussed the supposition that visual culture dissemination has a prevalent role in contemporary youth cultures and its ways of interpreting social reality. These youth cultures have introduced new strategies of communication and daily practices that are suitable, open, and continuously in flux, enabling various levels of participation in symbolic creation phenomena. The communicative interventions of the youth culture are largely converted into space and body practices, as I observed in several performances promoted by the steamers.

The products of the micro-media circuit elaborated by these neo-tribes, like *Vapor Marginal*, rely on creativity and imagination as social practices, as discussed by Arjun Appadurai (2004). Besides opening space to literary publicity for authors escaping from the mainstream circuit, steamers are clearly concerned with more than nostalgic evidence of a bygone age.

David Harvey (2008) developed the argument that space-time compression has triggered deep changes in the way people represent the world to themselves. Observation of and participation in the daily routines of social groups devoted to steampunk improve understanding of the visual discursive practices of both the actors in this process and the complexity of their cultural dynamics. In a globalized world increasingly focused on looking, analysis of culture through visual experiences is a way to understand the importance of contemporary visual practices in perceptions of the world.

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